

MARK MADISON: Hi. Today is June 30th, 2011, and my name is Mark Madison. We're in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, at the Student Climate and Conservation Congress, and we're very fortunate to be able to do a quick Podcast with Gary Ferguson, a writer and naturalist, speaker, and for this week our naturalist in residence for Sc3.

And let me tell you a little about Gary. Over the past 25 years, he's written for a wide variety of publications ranging from "Vanity Fair" to the "L.A. Times." He's the author of 18 books on science and nature, including the award-winning "Hawks Rest" published by National Geographic Adventure Press, as well as a keynote presenter at conservation and outdoor education gatherings, including this one. His newest book and currently in production is called "The Carry Home," a celebration of the outdoor life shared between Ferguson and his late wife Jane.

A lot of Gary's writing arises out of his intimate experiences. He's had quite a few adventures. He's trekked 500 miles through Yellowstone to write "Walking Down the Wild." He spent a season in the field at a wilderness therapy program where his book "Shouting at the Sky"-- and he journeyed 250 miles on foot for "Hawks Rest" and followed the seasons of the first 14 wolves released into Yellowstone National Park for my favorite of his books, "The Yellowstone Wolves: The First Year." Gary has written a lot of books. We recommend you check them out, and he's been incredibly inspirational here at the Sc3 working with youth in a variety of ways, speaking to them and helping lead a nature writing workshop and even talking to them about wolves.

So, Gary, thank you so much for coming to Sc3. What was it like working with the students out here?

GARY FERGUSON: You know, I can't overstate how impressed I've been with

these students. Sometimes I must confess I get a little worried and down in the dumps over what I imagine the trend being in our culture at large. I mentioned a few days ago a recent study that suggests the average 14-year-old will by the time she's 76 have spent 28 years actually plugged into some kind of technology, and as wonderful as those technologies are, and I use them myself almost every day, I think if that's all we have, it's starts to deaden the imagination, and imagination, as Einstein and others have said, is so critical to our ability to think outside the box, to enjoy life, and certainly to meet the kinds much complex challenges that we face, including climate change, and these students are clearly both technologically savvy and in full possession of their imagination, their curiosity, and the questions they've asked and the insights they've given me have inspired me to go home and keep up the good fight.

MARK MADISON: Now, Gary, you've written, as I mentioned, a lot of books. I'm not even sure if-- what did I say 18-- if that's still accurate--

GARY FERGUSON: I believe that's true.

MARK MADISON: One thing I've noticed about your books is they're often experiential in that you seek out challenges or new experiences. What is your writing style?

GARY FERGUSON: Well, I'd say-- I've been doing this for 25 years now, Mark, and the first 10 or 12 years I was writing mostly, I guess you could say, about the tracks that humans have left in nature. So sometimes those were eulogies for lost places, they were sounding the alarm bell for unsustainable practices that were harming perhaps wildlife or other aspects of our ecosystem. But increasingly in the last 10 or 12 years I've been more interested in the tracks that nature leaves in us, and there's increasing evidence back to youth again that just the smallest dose of nature on some

kind of regular basis, 20, 30, 40 minutes a week, can actually help moderate attention deficit disorder, for instance. It in younger children seems to be a critical aspect of developing creative capacity and critical thinking. So I'm looking at nature now through that lens to see what it has to offer us and what the experience of it can really mean for our lives and our ability to think and live well in the world.

MARK MADISON: Gary, you give a lot of inspirational talks around the country to young people and adults. What is your personal environmental ethos?

GARY FERGUSON: Well, I think that the thing we need to do is, immediately, and I'm thinking mostly in the face of complex issues like climate change, which often I think for folks just seems so complicated and so hopeless that the instinct is to turn away, but I'm often reminded of the Chinese idiom, the written language, for "crisis" happens to be "danger," the word for "danger," over the word for "opportunity." And no matter how dire our circumstances are, in fact, it's an opportunity to become very conscious and very present, and the notion of going through the day and perhaps turning off the lights when you leave the room or walking instead of always jumping in the car, those aren't, to me, sacrifices so much as opportunities to drive your life deeper into your day-to-day activities. So I think if we could just shift and not see this as a hopeless thing that can never be solved, but rather an opportunity for us to become a little bit more aware, we, in fact, would end up enjoying our lives and at the same time being a little bit better for the planet.

MARK MADISON: That's great. Let me go out with a two-part question. We talked about youth and nature, getting them out in nature. What was your favorite thing to do in nature when you were young? And what's your favorite thing to do outside today?

GARY FERGUSON: Well, my brother and I-- I grew up in Northern Indiana, so it wasn't overly wild, but my parents were convinced that it was important for my brother and I to have a place where we could climb trees, and they went out and bought a quarter-acre lot, in fact, it was completely undeveloped all around it, so it felt like thousands of acres as far as my brother and I were concerned, and we would go down there every weekend, no house on the property or anything, and we would camp out.

And my favorite thing was, after my brother and I mowed some lawns and got a little money, we bought a couple pairs of green rubber boots and we would play in the stream and tromp up and down and look for various aquatic creatures and build temporary dams out of rocks and race sticks and all the other things that kids playing in nature can do to activate their imagination.

Now my favorite thing to do remains, as it has been for many years, is actually backpacking. I still love the feeling of being self-contained, of throwing a pack on and going out for seven or eight or ten or fourteen days and being able to spontaneously go wherever the mood suggests you should go, sleeping under the stars.

I live very near Yellowstone, so sometimes those nights are anxious if I'm in grizzly country by myself. Then every snap of a branch is, I'm sure, in my imagination, a grizzly perhaps coming to get me. So it's an interesting opportunity, though, to look at your own fears and your own comfort level in nature.

And I also find that when I'm doing that kind of activity it's one-- one of the guarantees for me is that I will be fully in the present moment. After a couple days out, no longer regretting things in the past, no longer worrying about things in the future. I'm just fully present in what's happening around me. And to cultivate that skill of presence, I think, is absolutely essential to go through life with some chance at

deep joy on a regular basis.

MARK MADISON: Gary, if people wanted to learn more about where you might be speaking or your books, is there a web site you could send them to?

GARY FERGUSON: Yes, my web site is [www.wildwords.net](http://www.wildwords.net).

MARK MADISON: Great. And you're traveling around teaching and speaking and doing a wide variety of things, and they can find that out on the web site?

GARY FERGUSON: Yes, they can, at least my professional activity. Some of my hikes that I go on I don't bother putting up there, but, yes, they can certainly find out where I'm traveling and what I'm talking about in any given week.

MARK MADISON: Great. And hopefully we'll get you back at NCTC before too long.

GARY FERGUSON: Would love to.

MARK MADISON: Thank you very much, Gary. Thank to those of you who took the time to download this Podcast, and we'll have another one up in a couple days. So thanks again.

GARY FERGUSON: Thank you, Mark.